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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how first-grade teachers often perceive which of their students will ultimately succeed in school and which students will drop out. It argues that teachers look at a child's gender, color, behavior patterns, dress, family status, ethnicity, and socioeconomic level and, either consciously or unconsciously, label that child and make decisions about his or her educational future. It asserts that teachers look at students through their own values, norms, and cultural attitudes, making judgments about what is "normal" or positive and what is "abnormal" or negative. The paper discusses techniques to correct these biases, such as having teachers make home visits or meet with parents. It also discusses ways for teachers to talk to students about situations that may affect their school work, such as abuse and neglect. It concludes that teachers need to interact and train with people from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds to better understand their own prejudices and biases. (MDM)

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WORKSHOP TITLE:
"Social and Economic Factors that Place Children at Risk and Create Prejudices,"

MY TITLE:
Masks of Abnormality: Constructing Dropouts in the 1st Grade

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Greetings. And welcome to Seattle.

I am assuming that you are well aware of the crisis in childcare and the education of our children, otherwise you would not be here. I will not take up your time rattling off statistics, rather I hope to lead you into a discussion on how we as educators and childcare providers have contributed to this crisis in education. By critically examining the mythologies and realities of youth "at-risk" and by exploring our assumptions which lead to labeling, we will hopefully see how many of these supposed "deviant" characteristics are socially and economically based.

As a means to engage this topic, I will use the lenses of a first grade teacher. What I have found over the years is that most teachers, even in the first grade, perceive that they can tell which students are at-risk and which are not; who will be relegated to special education, and who will enter honors classes; who will go on to college, and who will not. This is in the first grade!

This reality is not only startling, it is a wake up call to all of us because many of the characteristics used to identify those at-risk are the result of social and economic phenomena, not immutable personal attributes. To see these attributes as static is to assume that social and economic forces alone dictate the lives of our children.

So what is it that blinds us to both the pain and the potential of our students? What is it that first grade teachers see and hear on the first day of class that lead them to predict the future of children? And how do these attributions affect the quality of the education that kids receive.

Basically, teachers see how kids **look**. This includes: their gender, color, behavior patterns, and how they are dressed. They **hear** accents, and variations in language usage.

Teachers are taught that the differences between children are symptoms of broader social conditions such as family composition, income, and ethnicity.

Some symptoms that have caused teachers to label children "at-risk" include: dirty clothes, hyperactivity, dark skin, learning disabilities, and non-standard English.

If teachers encounter symptoms that they perceive to be unacceptable based on their own upbringing and set of values, they have a tendency to believe that there is little that can be

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done for the child because s/he is from conditions beyond the control of the teacher.

Many of the conditions that literally turn teachers off to kids are related to children living in non-traditional "families." These include being raised by a single parent, grandparents, foster parents, gay/or lesbian parents, interracial parents, adopted parents, or being homeless. Other conditions include poverty, which manifests itself in a myriad of ways, being of certain ethnic backgrounds, having immigrant status, and living in certain vicinities.

The reasoning is sometimes subtle. Children who come from these backgrounds are "at-risk" therefore their chances of success are limited. Rather than seeking ways to intervene and adapt to the needs of the children, educators find themselves with an easy out. They absolve themselves of responsibility. These are perceived as conditions beyond their control. Students in turn pick up on these perceptions and respond accordingly, fullfilling the teacher's expectations.

So if the hyperactive child, or the child who is not performing at grade level, is being raised by a single parent, or lesbian parents, his/her behavior is attributed to the condition and the behavior is explained away. The child is often not given the appropriate attention needed to engage in learning. The hyperactivity might have to do with a sugar imbalance or the way the teachers is presenting the material. The child may infact be bored.

Similarly, for the child whose first language is not English. Why is it that in so many ESL classrooms children spend the entire day doing worksheets? How long can we continue to assume that if a child does not speak English fluently, she has low cognitive capabilities? How long before we realize that it is the teacher and the system who must be prepared to work with difference?

One of the ways that I try to get teachers more aware of the political, economic, cultural and social context from which their students come from is to require work in the community as part of the coursework. Depending on the class, this has included making home visits, conducting interviews with individuals who work at public agencies that assist the poor and children, and talking with other educators and the students themselves. It should be noted that the vast majority of the teachers I have worked with have never engaged in any of these activities in their professional life. Most expressed a fear of doing so. This is not unusual since most teachers are middle class, white, and have not grown up in diverse, or low income families. But fear paralyzes; it puts us on the defensive; it blinds us; it inhibits us from reaching beyond what is comfortable and familiar; it turns its back on potential; it contaminates human connection.

One of the more frequent justifications used by educators to absolve themselves of their responsibility for "at-risk" children

is to demonstrate that the parents of these children do not care about education. I hear this cry from teachers daily. This assumption is often based on the most superficial data: parents do not show up for P.T.A. meetings or parent conferences.

In an attempt to counteract this mythology, I required that all my students in a particular graduate seminar do home visits. One third grade teacher, I'll call her Clara, was the most resistant. She was born and raised in Idaho and had never seen a person of color face to face until she came to Tacoma to go to college. She married a policeman of similar background who ironically was assigned duty in the central district of the black community as his first patrol. She ended up teaching in an interracial school. They both had very negative stereotypes of African Americans, even though they had never spoken to one personally, only within the confines of their jobs.

Clara didn't have a clue about how she would conduct the interviews. Her husband warned her against going into the homes of African Americans. But Clara was curious. She decided to send out notes to the parents of her students kids asking if they would participate in this project. Only a few responded and they were white. She then got up the nerve to call the homes of 4 African American children that she identified as being "at risk". She candidly told the parents on the phone that she had never been in the home of an African American and was kind of afraid. They assured her that it would be ok and welcomed the teacher of **their** child into their home.

The end result of these visits is that Clara was transformed. She realized not only that these people's homes were similar to hers, but that they cared as much about the education of their kids as she would hers. While it may seem simple-minded for some of you here, but Clara presumed that color was highly correlated with cleanliness. She was amazed to find these homes, while in a low income area, immaculately clean and the family gracious to the point of offering her food and drink. They shared many of the same concerns about violence and education. Clara, came to understand that working class parents do not necessarily see it as their responsibility to become involved in school affairs. Many assume that as a teacher, you should be handling the situation. Moreover, many parents have complex work schedules, family responsibilities, and often lack transportation especially at night. They might also fear being stereotyped based on their accent, clothes, or lack of knowledge about schooling. Some children are embarrassed if their parents show up at school, and convey this message to them in not so subtle ways.

In another class, I required my students to identify and interview six of their students whom they perceived to be at risk. One of the teachers was in a first grade class and was unsure how this would go. She basically believed that all her kids were at risk because they were poor.

One day she was talking with Chevon, a child who seldom spoke in class and was failing. My student asked Chevon about

her school work and whether she got help at home or not. Chevon began talking about the people who made up "her family." One was an "uncle" who Chevon said had hurt her. As the discussion continued my student realized that this was a case of sexual abuse and asked Chevon if she had ever told her mother. She hadn't. The reason, "It will make her sad."

The next day there was a call from the office, Chevon's mother wanted to talk to my student. She was nervous to say the least. But as she entered the office Chevon's mother, a small African American woman, extended her hand to thank my student for getting Chevon to talk.

"What ever you said to her opened up her silence. I have known for about 3 years that something was wrong but I didn't know what it was. I want to thank you." My student was in tears; she wrote me later, "Now I know why I went into teaching."

The stories are numerous. I have one for every condition I have listed above. About the gay child beaten by his parents if he crossed his legs the wrong way, later taunted and pushed down the stairs at school by peers. Or the African American parents in Cincinnati last month who came to plead before the assistant superintendent for their children to not be suspended for some trivial, though annoying, occurance.

You all have stories of your own.

Yet the question remains: what are the implications for educators and childcare givers?

Basically I see two that dominate the landscape: first, increase the diversity of access; and second, invest in on-going training.

It is imperative that those who work with youth know how to work with diversity. I mean this in the broadest sense of the word. No one has a corner on this. Just because a person is African American does not mean that they are able or willing to work with Cambodian students. An Asian American might be resistant to working with children whose pareants are gay. Some teachers who are middle class are reluctant to work with low income children.

None of us are "color blind" or without bias. We all bring a host of prejudices to the table. Denial of this awareness is of little use. Rather we need to acknowledge where these biases lie and what the sources are. One of the best ways to do this is to increase the diversity of people that you work with. I mean by this, people from a variety of class, ethnic, language, regional, and sexual orientations. In addition to access, we also need to provide on-going education for both the new and the veteran educator. Cross training is essential. Only by people of different backgrounds sharing perspectives can we hope to become aware of our blind spots. What might appear to be a harmless jesture to you could be offensive if not hostile, to someone else. Life is an evolving phenomenon requiring adaptation and transformation. We have the incredible privilege to be in a country filled with people from all walks of life. Quality educators are those who are willing to continue to learn

from others, and participate in difficult dialogues. We all need to constantly be challenged in our beliefs and attitudes.